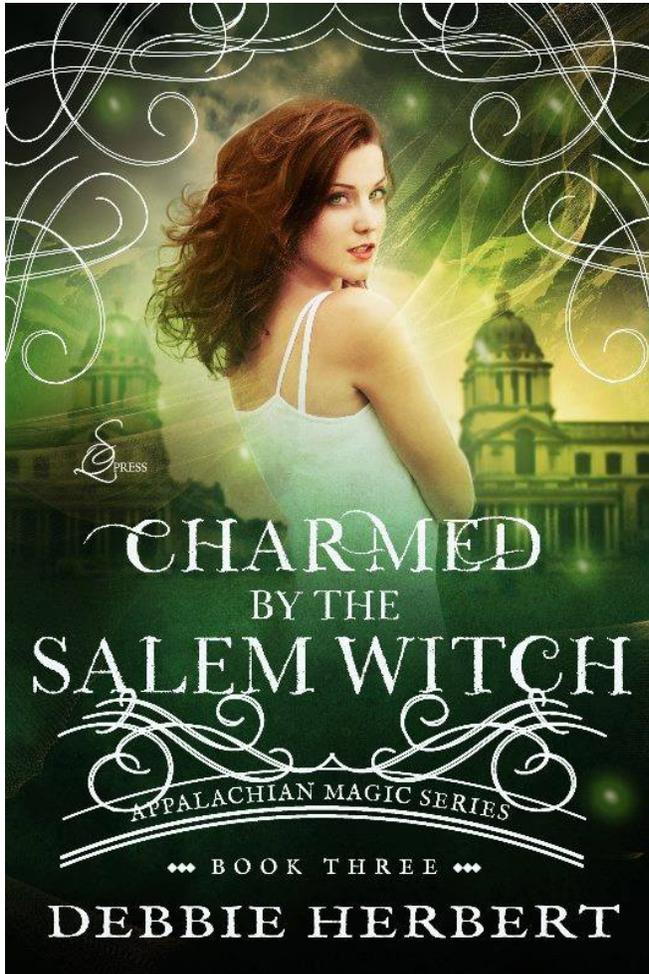


Charmed by the Salem Witch

by Debbie Herbert

Chapter 1



*Go to Salem, they urged.*

*You'll love it, they promised.*

*It will be fun, they said.*

*They lied.*

Tanner rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on a string of computer code. Some fun. He could have stayed in Alabama if he'd wanted to be stuck in a boring tech job. Sighing, he shoved out of his chair and walked to the window. In the darkness of late afternoon, a light shone in the library next door on the campus quad.

She was there again. Sitting alone at a table, her long, brown hair swept to one side, her enchanting profile glowing like a halo of warmth against the New England chill. Damn, the unbearable cold had turned his brain to poetic mush. She was just a girl, and he'd had more than his fair share of dating last year. Before everything had turned to shit.

He'd prove she was nothing special. Tanner abruptly closed down the computer, grabbed his coat, and walked down the semi-deserted hallway. "See you in the morning," he called to his boss.

Mr. Higginboth didn't bother looking up from his hunched position over a computer. "Night," he mumbled, pushing up wire-framed glasses from the bridge of his nose.

Tanner shuddered. Would that be him thirty years from now? Buried in an academic environment, wearing old-man woolen sweaters and deciphering endless lines of computer code with steadily declining eyesight? Not how he'd envisioned his future. He closed his eyes and remembered the thrill of catching his one and only touchdown pass—the cheering crowd, outrunning the opposing team's defenders, the ball tucked safely in his arms, and crossing the goal line. Score!

How things had changed in one year. And not for the good.

Bitter wind slammed into his body as he exited the tech lab. He clutched his leather jacket tighter, glumly trying to imagine how much colder Salem would be in winter. Back home, he'd still be in short sleeves and enjoying sunshine.

His right knee throbbed, as it always did in cold weather. Damn nuisance. You'd think he was ninety instead of nineteen. He walked as quickly as he could with the bum knee, grateful for the warmth of the library as he pushed open its heavy, wooden doors. The cozy scent of old books and weathered oak lifted his sour mood.

Quickly, he scanned the towering rows of books and the whispering crowd of students at the center tables. In the far right corner, on the second level, *she* was bent over a book, her long hair a veil, covering her face.

Tanner inwardly groaned as he climbed the stairs, trying to avoid wincing at the darting pain needling through his knee. A gaggle of girls passed, shooting him sly glances. He winked at the boldest one, who had flaming red hair, dressed all in black, and sported a large pentacle pendant. Back home, she'd have stuck out like a black widow on a bed of white linen. But at the Women's College of Salem, she was part of a notable minority that flaunted a belief in witchcraft. She smiled, but her eyes held no warmth. She turned her back and elbowed the girl nearest her orbit. "He's cute but . . . all crippled up. Too bad."

His face warmed. The remark had been whispered, but it was loud enough to carry—as the girl no doubt intended. He was used to being called cute, but not to people wondering at his injury. At least, not that he'd

overheard. Way to build his confidence as he approached the girl to whom he'd been drawn for the past few weeks.

He squared his shoulders, determined not to let the offhand comment ruin his plans. If he'd learned nothing else from his old football coach, it was to persevere, no matter the obstacles. Still, he was used to outmaneuvering three-hundred-pound linebackers, not pathetically limping like an old man as he climbed a set of stairs. All while a group of girls insulted his dignity.

The girls went their way, chattering, never sparing a glance behind them. Amazing—not in a good way—that he'd gone from a rising football star to nearly invisible.

*Different.* A tiny flash of red on the floor caught his attention. Tanner bent over, picking up a small, black feather with a skein of red floss clumsily woven into its spine. A few inches of the red thread formed a tiny circle, perhaps large enough for a small wrist. Some kind of Native American bracelet, perhaps? He looked around, but nobody caught his eye. It probably belonged to one of the girls who had laughed at him. Too bad. He wasn't going to search them out and ask. He shrugged and stuffed it into his jacket pocket, intending to throw it in the nearest trashcan.

At last, he reached the top. Tanner gripped the railing, collecting his breath and his pride. Once both were again intact, he walked toward the mystery girl, his footsteps creaking on the old pine flooring, but she didn't look up from the book held in her hands, a heavy, dusty tome—*Salem Witch Trials and Mass Hysteria: 1692—1693*.

Tanner flicked his index finger against the book's spine to get her attention. "A little light reading?" he joked.

Eyes as gray as a November sky regarded him with a decided chill. He was definitely striking out with the ladies today.

Her voice was smooth and cold as ice. "Nothing *light* about the killing of innocent women."

"That's what you call irony." Tanner pulled out a chair across from her and sat, uninvited. "You writing a history paper on the trials?"

She cocked her head to one side and regarded him with a raised brow. "Yes. Do you need to use this book?"

"Oh, no, I'm not a student."

Wariness sharpened her delicate features, and her fingers gripped the edge of the table. *Real smooth there, Tanner. Now you're scaring the women away.*

"Then who—"

"It's okay," he said quickly. "I work here. In the IT department. My uncle—Ralph Landers—is the college dean."

Her death grip on the book relaxed a fraction.

"I can prove it." He dug in his coat pocket and fished out his employee ID. "See? I'm totally legit." He slapped the card on the table and slid it toward her.

"Tanner Adams," she read aloud, comparing his face to the awkward employee picture. "Computer tech, WCS."

The way she said his name with her proper, reserved New England inflection was strangely sexy. She pushed his ID card back on the table, and their fingers touched. Chills, the good kind, vibrated through his entire body.